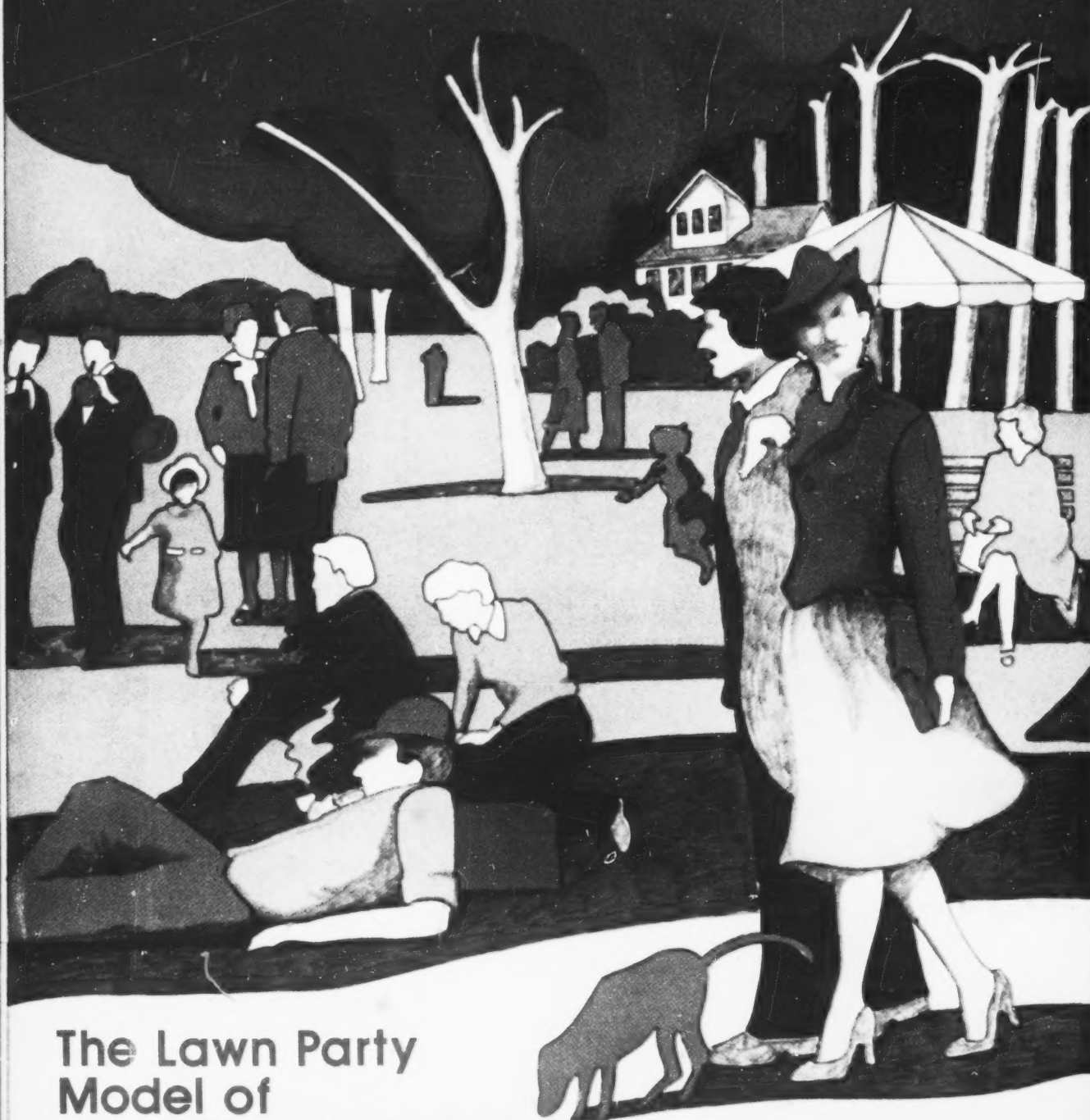


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The Lawn Party Model of Educational Change

Farrar, DeSanctis, and Cohen

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Parental and Community Involvement: Rx for Better School Discipline

by William B. Thomas

It is up to educators to forge a productive liaison between home and school, says Mr. Thomas. Miller Elementary School in Pittsburgh is a shining example.

Parents and educators alike see discipline as a major U.S. public school problem.¹ This problem has political overtones, because economically deprived urban children are the youngsters educators are most likely to label as behavioral problems. This labeling, in turn, deprives such youngsters initially of classroom — and ultimately of societal — rewards.

I do not intend to take issue here with the schools' goal of developing student conformity to behavioral standards. I intend instead to focus on an expedient but often-ignored strategy for achieving that goal: Educators should be enlisting lower- and working-class parents as allies in their struggles to maintain school control.

The school is the primary credentialing agency for occupational status in the U.S. Teachers, therefore, are occupational gatekeepers; through a system of rewards and punishments, they determine to a considerable degree who will and who will not gain access to the social prizes of power, wealth, and prestige. Each student is forced to compete for a limited supply of rewards, and the resources for obtaining those rewards are unequally distributed. There are daunting artificial barriers, both social and economic, that some members of U.S. society must overcome in order to compete effectively.

Nor are the rules of the competition objectively applied. In 1979, for example, I conducted a pilot survey of 60 experienced teachers enrolled in graduate education courses at the University of Pittsburgh. I asked this sample, drawn from urban, suburban, and rural schools throughout western Pennsylvania, to rank the kinds of students toward whom they were favorably disposed. The results, shown in Table 1, suggest that some teachers stress pupil behavior over pupil achievement. High achievers are sometimes penalized for antisocial behavior. Some teachers favor well-behaved low achievers over high achievers with behavioral problems. Moreover, replications

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Table 1. Frequencies and Percentages of Teacher Ratings Of Achievement and Behavior as Criteria for Favoring Pupils

Criteria	Ratings (N = 60)			
	Least Favorable	Less Favorable	Favorable	Most Favorable
	f %	f %	f %	f %
High achievers, usually well-behaved	2 (3.3)	1 (1.7)	12 (20.0)	45 (75.0)
High achievers, often misbehaved	19 (31.7)	35 (58.3)	5 (8.3)	1 (1.7)
Low achievers, usually well-behaved	1 (1.7)	6 (10.0)	40 (66.7)	13 (21.6)
Low achievers, often misbehaved	38 (63.3)	18 (30.0)	3 (5.0)	1 (1.7)

of this study with other groups of teachers and principals in Pennsylvania have shown these findings to be surprisingly consistent.

The findings suggest that there is a hidden educational agenda. The distribution of school rewards (e.g., high grades, high class rank, scholarships, leadership positions) is ostensibly based on objective performance and achievement criteria. Yet many teachers apparently evaluate and reward students — at least informally — primarily on the basis of their behavior.

This hidden agenda has ramifications that extend far beyond the classroom. Students who are labeled as behavioral problems are more likely than not to be urban black youngsters, if the suspension data from a nine-year period in the Pittsburgh public schools (Table 2) are typical.

Other research data suggest that children from economically deprived or single-parent families are also more likely than others to be suspended.² It seems highly probable that many of these suspended students will never realize the social and economic benefits that school completion purports to offer.

I have no doubt that learning requires some discipline. Yet there is no certain relationship between a pupil's obedience to the teacher's authority and his or her mastery of basic skills.

The data relating behavioral problems to social class or minority-group status are compounded by two other factors. First, teachers often see lower- and working-class parents as tepid supporters of school behavioral standards. For example, when I asked 59 urban schoolteachers in Penn-

Table 2. Frequencies and Percentages of Pittsburgh Students Suspended, 1970-79, Classified by Racial Group and School Population

Year	BLACKS			WHITES		
	Frequencies Of Suspensions	School Popula- tion	Percent- age Suspended	Frequencies Of Suspensions	School Popula- tion	Percent- age Suspended
1970-71	170	29,027	.58	28	43,695	.06
1971-72	245	28,564	.85	70	41,973	.16
1972-73	298	28,706	1.03	60	40,961	.14
1973-74	252	28,217	.89	45	39,238	.11
1974-75	245	27,529	.88	46	37,507	.12
1975-76	190	27,458	.69	41	34,884	.11
1976-77	342	26,820	1.27	65	32,202	.20
1977-78	389	25,858	1.50	111	29,353	.37
1978-79	429	24,756	1.73	109	26,978	.40

sylvania to rate parental support of their schools' disciplinary policies and practices, two-thirds of these teachers called parental support either moderate or low (Table 3). This is hardly surprising, in view of the fact that lower- and working-class parents often believe that schools pay little attention to youngsters from poor families.³

Table 3. Frequencies and Percentages of Teacher Ratings Of Parental Support of School Disciplinary Policies and Practices

	Low		Moderate		High	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Elementary School (N = 39)	3	(7.7)	21	(53.8)	15	(38.5)
High School (N = 20)	2	(10.0)	13	(65.0)	5	(25.0)
Total (N = 59)	5	(8.5)	34	(57.6)	20	(33.9)

Second, teachers tend to hold parents at bay through aloofness, rigid bureaucratic practices, and claims of territorial rights and professionalism.⁴ My study showed that these same 59 Pennsylvania teachers, for example, firmly believed that parental support is a significant factor in maintaining school discipline, but their encouragement of active parental involvement is often only rhetorical. Sociologist Howard Becker has suggested that teachers are inclined to see parents as "an unpredictable and uncontrollable element, as a force that endangers and may even destroy the existing authority system over which the teacher has some measure of control."⁵

This schism between parents and schools will not be resolved until educators accept the idea that most parents desire the best for their children (even

though they may lack the wherewithal to obtain it). Since parents exist on the periphery of the educational hierarchy, it is also up to the educators themselves to initiate measures designed to forge a home/school liaison.

There are sound reasons for doing this. Substantial evidence demonstrates that, when parents and other community members are intimately involved in the day-to-day learning of their children, schools do better at managing disciplinary problems. They also do better at educating pupils and maintaining parental and community support.⁶

Miller Elementary School, a building that serves 405 black youngsters from predominantly lower- and working-class families in Pittsburgh, is a good example of such a home/school liaison and its positive outcomes. At Miller an open-door policy encourages parents to visit school personnel at any time; appointments are not necessary. Principal Booker T. Reeves supervises classes himself, when necessary, to free teachers for conferences with parents.

The administration and faculty see Miller School as much more than an institution for imparting knowledge and skills; it is also a community resource and advocacy center. Reeves coaches basketball and baseball during and after school hours; Miller teachers voluntarily conduct after-school activities and urge all youngsters to participate. Moreover, Reeves counsels many parents and frequently invokes the power of his office to help them cut through red tape to obtain necessary help from governmental, judicial, and social service agencies.

Miller parents, for their part, volunteer as tutors, teacher aides, chaperones for field trips and overnight camping trips, and as advisors to after-school cooking classes for fourth- and fifth-graders. Thanksgiving and end-of-year banquets

are sponsored by local businesses and prepared by the parents. One business firm recently donated two 10-speed bicycles to be awarded to the best Miller School essayists. The 120-member PTA, meanwhile, holds fund-raising events to purchase special items (such as a color television set) for the school.

Another factor that sets Miller School apart from most other schools is that teachers are encouraged to live within the school's attendance boundaries. All but two of the 27 teachers live within five miles of the school, and three teachers are themselves graduates of Miller.

While causation is difficult to determine, it seems highly probable that the school's rapport with its patrons and community members contributes to the high morale among teachers, parents, and pupils. Requests for teacher transfers to other schools are almost nil. Pupil attendance averages 96%. Most important, there are no suspensions for disciplinary problems.

What has happened at Miller Elementary School can happen at any school. It's time for educators to stop talking about discipline problems and start taking action. One direction — the recruiting of lower- and working-class parents as allies — holds considerable promise.



"I think I'll take the day off!"

1. See the latest Gallup poll report in the September 1980 *Kappan*.
2. For data on social-class discrimination in the use of school suspensions, see the report by the Children's Defense Fund, *Children Out of School in America* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Research Project, Inc., 1974), pp. 134, 135.
3. Richard A. Cloward and James A. Jones, "Social Class: Educational Attitudes and Participation," in A. Harry Passow, ed., *Education in Depressed Areas* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1970), pp. 190-216.
4. Howard Becker, "The Teacher in the Authority System of the Public School," *Journal of Educational Sociology*, November 1953, pp. 128-41. See also Becker, "Social-Class Variations in the Teacher-Pupil Relationship," *Journal of Educational Sociology*, April 1952, pp. 451-65; and W. Allison Davis, *Social Class Influences upon Learning* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1950).
5. Becker, "The Teacher in the Authority System," op. cit.
6. The following sources offer theoretical and empirical evidence of correlations between participation in instructional/organizational affairs (as predictors or indicators of individual support of the institution/organization) and the success of the institution/organization's mission: Robert E. Agger and Marshall Goldstein, *Who Will Rule the Schools: A Cultural Class Crisis* (Berkeley, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1971), pp. 112-30; Sidney Verba, *Small Groups and Political Behavior* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 206-43; and Fred D. Carver and Thomas T. Sergiovanni, eds., *Organization and Human Behavior: Focus on Schools* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969). Other relevant sources are Cloward and Jones, op. cit., pp. 215, 216; Wilbur B. Brookover, Ann Paterson, and Shailer Thomas, *Self-Concept of Ability and School Achievement* (East Lansing, Mich.: Bureau of Educational Research Services, Michigan State University, 1965); and Herbert J. Schiff, "The Effect of Personal Contractual Relationships on Parents' Attitudes Toward and Participation in Local School Affairs" (Doctoral dissertation, Northwestern University, 1963).